CHOC OF THE FOREIGN LEGION

By H. De Vere Stacpoole.

When France found herself faced with the problem of Algeria—that is to say, with the problem of infinite wastes of sand inhabited by a foe mobile and ungraspable as the desert wind—she formed the Foreign Legion. She called to the wastrels, the criminals, the despairing and the impoverished—and they came. Men of genius, street sweepers, artists, doctors, engineers—it would be difficult to touch a profession, a race or a grade of intellect not found in the legion in Algeria. In the present war this group of warriors gained fame for their fighting qualities.

THE first rays of the morning sun were stealing up the palm-bordered roads toward Sidi-bel-Abbes, above whose ramparts the minaret of the great mosque blazed white in the sky. Eighty miles from Oran, on the coast, set away in the vague, yellow, illimitable wastes of the desert, Sidi-bel-Abbes, the headquarters of the Foreign Legion, is surely one of the strangest cities on earth.

It was built by the Foreign Legion; it is swept and garnished by the Foreign Legion; it is held against the Arabs by the Foreign Legion. At night the electric lights round the band stand of the Foreign Legion on the Place Sadi Carnot blaze against the Algerian stars, while the muezzins on the balconies of the minarets keep watch over Islam, and their voices send north, south, east and west the cry that was old in the time of Sinbad the Sailor!

All' il Allah—God is great.

But the marvel of Sidi-bel-Abbes is not the fact that here Edison and Strauss face Mahommed in the form of his priests, nor the flower gardens blooming on the face of the desert, nor the roads along which the Arabs stalk and the automobiles dash. The marvel of Sidi-bel-Abbes lies in the legion.

The sun had touched the upper border of the huge, blank eastern wall of the legion's barracks, and it was still a few minutes before reveille, when. in room No. 6 of the tenth company the garde chambre for the day slipped from his bed, stretched and yawned noiselessly, and glanced around him.

The room was like the ward of a hospital, and the likeness was made no less striking by the card above each of the twenty beds, a white card, setting out each man's name and number.

Radoub's number as shown by the card on the bed he had just vacated was 7083.

He was a small and wiry-looking individual, with the face of a gamin; that is to say, the face of a child who is a jester, who may be a cutthroat, and who is certainly and above all things a Parisian.

Radoub had in fact been an apache by profession, and M. Lepine had given him the choice between a penitentiary and the legion. He chose the legion, because, as he said, he liked the name better.

He was quite aware that life in the legion was worse than life in a penitentiary, and he did not care a button about the social difference; he liked the name better, that was all. He was an artist.

He stood now, for a second, gazing at the others, nineteen men stretched in all the attitudes of slumber—Germans, French, an Englishman an American, a Greek and a Russian. Then, shuffling on some clothes, he left the room silently as the shadow of a moving cat.

In a moment he was back with huge jug of steaming coffee and as he entered shouting to the others to wake up, the reveille came from the barracks yard—the reveille of the French army that sounds every morning across France, to find its echoes in Algeria:

Ra tat tat ta. Rat tat tat ta,
Rat tat tat ta ta ta ta.
Ra tat tat ta. Rat tat tat ta,
Rat tat tat ta ta ta ta.

In a moment the room was astir. Between the reveille and the muster in the barracks yard there was only half an hour, yet in that half hour the coffee was drunk, the men dressed, the beds made and the floor swept. Radoub yelling to the others to hurry up, as it was his duty to put the completing touch to the dusting and cleaning and fetch the water.

Then he went tearing down the stairs after the rest and out in the barrack yard, half cut in two by the blaze of the 6-o'clock sun and, under a sky blue as a cornflower, the long, long lines of white-clad men fell in, while the echoes roused to the bugles.

Then, led by the bugles, the columns wheeled out of the barrack gates, making for the great drill ground, where the arms were piled, and the men, in square formation now, were exercised at the double.

It was terrific; with the sun blaze now in their faces, with the sun beating now on their backs, and now with their sides to a furnace door, round and round and round and round the great parade ground they went, the dust raising and hanging about them in a haze.

Ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, and then the thunder and movement ceased and the legionnaires, released for a moment after their first exercise of the day, broke into groups, cigarettes were lit, and the dustladen air filled with the fumes of caporal.

Radoub, though sweating, showed little signs of stress; he had lungs of leather. Not so Casmir, a man in his company to whom he was talking.

Casmir was a bitter looking individual who had once been a government clerk. His white uniform was clinging to him with perspiration, and he was just getting his wind back.

The two men were walking up and down rapidly, for it is impossible to stand still after an hour of the double.

"Well," said Casmir, "this finishes me. This is the last time. I'm off."

He had been threatening for the last week to make a bolt.

Radoub, a fountain of wisdom in most things practical, had always dissuaded him from that fatal course. The man who tries to escape from the grip of the legion is, in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases, brought back, and when he is brought back, heaven help him.

"Take my advice," said Radoub, "and leave that alone. No good. Stick to it as I have done, and make the best of it. I have been at it four years and ten months tomorrow, and in another two months I walk out like a gentleman."

"Well," said Casmir, "I have been in it only six months, and in another twelve hours—well, you will see."

"Have your way," said Radoub; "you are a fool. Do you thing a clever man like myself would not have cut and run years ago had there been a decent chance?"

The bugle was sounding "Fall in," and the morning exercises went on. At 11 o'clock, sweating, dusty, fagged out, but cheerful, the vast regiment of legionnaires, wheeling in column formation to the sound of drums as well as bugles, marched back to barracks.

As they passed through the gates, Radoub flung a word to a small and dusty dog that was hanging about the gate. It was Choc.

He had picked up Choc one night, a year ago, in the town. He seemed compounded of all the known breeds of dog—with the exception of the noblest.

Choc was dust-colored, his hair stood in permanent bristle upon his shoulders, and he was terrific in battle; he had fought everything in Sidibel-Abbes and in the negro village that lies by the parade ground of the foreign legion, and without any manner of doubt his family tree, had it been worked back, would have disclosed an Irish terrier somewhere in the not remote distance. But the fighting qualities of Choc made less appeal to Radoub than the fact that he was an out-and-out blackguard, an expert thief, an apache.

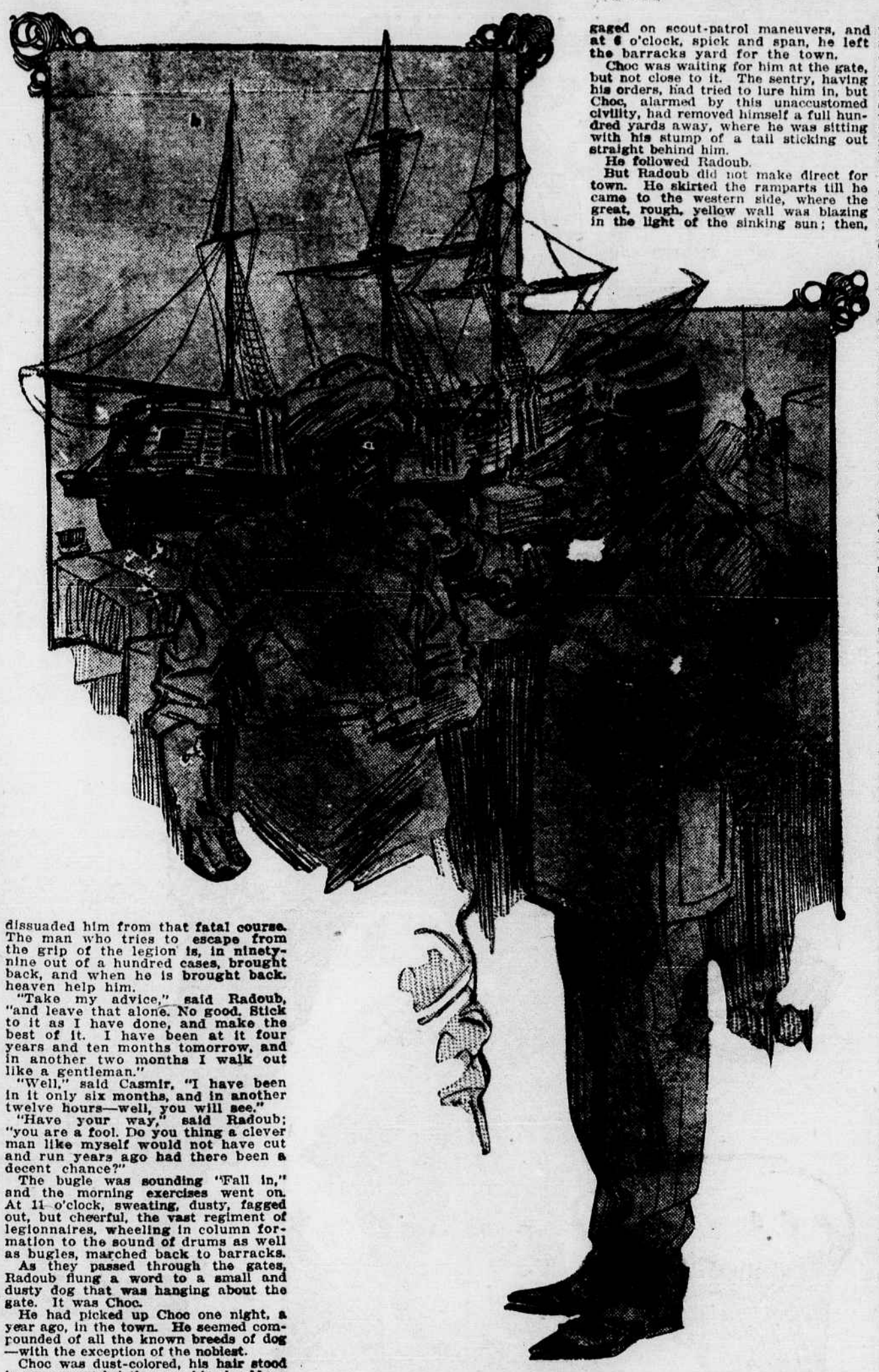
I have said that Choc was hanging about the gate. That was the impression he gave one. It was not the honest waiting of a dog for its master; it was the waiting of a confederate for his mate at a public house door or the corner of a race course. There was no tail-wagging. As the column passed in, the dust-colored one sniffing about did not even cast an eye at Radoub. Then, when the last files had passed the gateway, he slunk in after them and hung about in the courtyard till Radoub, who was a friend of the cook, came out of the cookhouse with a bone for him.

This happened every day. Choc, who slept in some hole or corner of the town best known to himself, paid two daily visits to the barracks, one at 11 and one at 6.

At 11 o'clock he got a bone, or, by chance, a bit of meat; at 6 o'clock he appeared to accompany his master into the town.

At 6 o'clock every day the work of the legion is over, and you may see the legionnaires, spick and span, streaming through the barrack gates to the town, there to amuse themselves as best they can. They have no money, literally no money. The cent a day paid by the government scarcely serves for tobacco; they have to buy their own soap, mostly, and washing is a big item in a regiment where white uniforms of washable materials are worn, and must be worn speckless.

Radoub had taught Choc a lot of tricks. In the Place Sadi Carnot of an evening, with the band playing a march, you might have seen Choc on his hind legs marching up and down before his master. Visitors to Sidi-bel-Abbes, attracted by the animal's queer appearance and his tricks, would question Radoub about him, and the result was nearly always profitable to Radoub. It was said that Choc stole cigarettes for him in the native quarters of the town, sneaking packets from the Moslem traders' stalls while Radoub held the latter in light conversation, and not only cigarettes, but articles more bulky and more valuable.



TURNING, HE FOUND HIMSELF FACE TO FACE WITH SERGT. PELLETIER.

Today, Radoub, having given Choc his bone and dismissed him, was turning to enter the barracks, when he ran into the arms of Corp. Klein.

"Ah, there's that dog of yours again," said Klein. "I was looking for you to tell you. The colonel says he has had enough of him, and he's to be shot."

Radoub swore the great oath of the legion—which is unprintable.

"Shot—and what for?"

"Biting the sentry. It was last night, after you had come back from the town. Seguer was on duty, and the beast stuck about the gate, and Seguer tried to make him go, and got bitten in the foot, right through his boot."

"He must have kicked him," said Radoub.

"Who knows? Not only that, but the colonel says he has been having reports about you and him and your doings in the town; says that the legion has enough blackguards in it without enlisting four-footed ones, and there you are; the order is promulgated, the dog has to go."

"Catch him, then," said Radoub.

Klein, a big man in spite of his name, came toward Choc, who was busy with his bone. Radoub whistled shrilly between his teeth, and the dog, picking up his treasure, started for the barrack gate. Flying pebbles and dust marked his path and he was gone.

Klein laughed. He was a good-natured man, a friend of Radoub's, and he had no grudge against the dog.

"All the same," said he, "the dog has to go; you know what it is. The order has been given, and once the order has been given there is no staying it."

Radoub knew quite well what it was. He knew the colonel and he knew the legion.

Choc might evade capture for a time, but caught he would be sooner or later.

He said nothing, however. The bugle call for soup rang through the yard, and, as he was orderly of his room, he had to rush off to the kitchen, from where, in a moment, he returned, bearing a steaming can for his men; then he had to return for bread.

All that afternoon Radoub was engaged on scout-patrol maneuvers, and at 6 o'clock, spick and span, he left the barracks yard for the town.

Choc was waiting for him at the gate, but not close to it. The sentry, having his orders, had tried to lure him in, but Choc, alarmed by this unaccustomed civility, had removed himself a full hundred yards away, where he was sitting with his stump of a tail sticking out straight behind him.

He followed Radoub.

But Radoub did not make direct for town. He skirted the ramparts till he came to the western side, where the great, rough, yellow wall was blazing in the light of the sinking sun; then, getting into the ditch, he followed the wall a certain distance, stopped, glanced up and down the ditch to make sure that no one was observing him, and then drew a stone from the wall, disclosing a hole, in which was seated, like a squat gnome, a little, fae linen bag.

This was his cache—the money he had collected by one means or another during the last four years and ten months. It was a fair sum, partly in gold, partly in silver, and he had intended it for the day, now only two months distant, when, to use his own words, he would walk out of the legion like a gentleman. He was going to use it for a different purpose now, and placing the bag in his pocket, without troubling to close the cache, he turned and, followed by the dog, came back along the ditch.

Stars like the points of needles were piercing the pansy-colored sky when Radoub and his companion reached the Place Sadi Carnot. The place was crowded; legionnaires, visitors and townsfolk crowding around the bandstand, some seated, others standing about in groups.

Then the electric lights blazed, and the band struck up. They were playing the "Sambre et Meuse," that splendid march of the French army, spirited enough almost to raise the slain, but Radoub did not beat time with his foot, nor, when Choc glanced at him, did he give the dog the signal to start his tricks.

He walked about for a while, showing himself to his companions, then he disappeared from the place and, followed by the dog, sought the native streets.

Sidi-bel-Abbes is slashed across by two great boulevards running north and south and east and west. Here you find plate glass windows and Paris jewelry, motor cars, cocottes, American women in blue veils. Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London and New York, all are represented by some fragment of thier social life, just as in the legion they are represented, each, by some form of the universal diseases that prey on society.

Behind these gay boulevards you find the real Sidi-bel-Abbes. You walk into the country of Islam. Passing through the narrow bazaars, the moon above your head becomes the moon that lit the three calendars, and the lamps that light the gloom of the booths the lamps of Aladdin.

Radoub, followed by his companion, passed through several of the narrow streets till he reached an alley, where, at a door set in the wall, he knocked.

The door opened and he went in, leaving Choc seated on the ground to wait for him outside. Arab dogs came down the alley, saw the stranger, advanced, burbling and bristling, recognized him and passed on; the rising moon laid a pale finger on the wall top, and from far away across the faint noises of the cit came the cry of the priest from the balcony of the minaret calling the faithful to prayer; and now a window opened somewhere and the laughter of a girl, the tinkle tankle of a guitar and a snatch of song blew away on the night wind and then snapped off to the closing of the casement.

This was the Spanish quarter of the Moslem town, and perhaps the wickedest, outside the jurisdiction of the Bureau Arabe, and visited only by the shadiest characters among the European population of the place.

Twenty minutes passed, and then the door opened and a man came out. He was dressed in mufti, but the alteration did not deceive Choc. He knew his master at once and, rising, followed him down the alley into the street.

Radoub had made up his mind to escape from the legion. It was the maddest act of his life.

First of all, he was not an ordinary legionnaire, but a criminal serving for rehabilitation. If he managed to escape he would have to begin his life over again without papers. It would be impossible for him to find work in France; he must go to England or some other country where papers were not required. Then, again, he had only to wait two short months and he would secure rehabilitation and be able to leave the legion and obtain work.

Though he had started in life as an apache, common sense had been talking to him for the last two years or so, pointing out that a franc made by robbery is not worth two sous made by work. The rate of exchange is always against the criminals; so appalling is it that one may wonder at any man with an ounce of brains doing business on such ruinous terms. Radoub had recognized this, and he had determined, on finding himself his own man again, to take to honest ways.

He was now ruining all the plans he had made for the future so nearly in his grasp. He was throwing everything away—for a dog.

As a matter of fact, there was no struggle involved in the giving up of his plans. Cold plans for the future, dictated by common sense, did not stand for a moment before the warm desire to keep the dog and flout authority. Choc was his mate, and he was not going to lose him.

Passing a shop where viands were sold, he bought two sausages and put them in his pocket, then he walked on, striking toward the European quarter.

To Radoub it seemed a month ago since he had left the Place, and it seemed extraordinary to hear the band at it still.

But he had little time to think of anything except his objective, and that was Oran, eighty miles away.

There is a railway between Sidi-bel-Abbes and Oran; that is to say, a trap for runaway legionnaires. Radoub was not such a fool as to use the railway or even to walk along the embankment. Time was of no matter to him. The pursuit would be after him before he could reach Oran even by rail; he had to trust entirely to his disguise and to luck. He recognized that Choc would be his main difficulty; he could not disguise Choc.

He had lit a cigarette, and he passed along to the city gates without let or hindrance; a bourgeois taking an evening stroll with his dog excited no comment. At the gates it was the same, and walking in a leisurely manner, with his hands in his pockets, he found the road to Oran and struck along it. It lay before him white in the moonlight, and, beyond the gardens of the town, on either side stretched the sand wastes and rocks of the miserable desert that in daylight is yellow, parched, sun-bitten and murderous in its desolation. A few stunted palms broke the skyline on the right, while on the left could be seen the lights of the railway and the furnace-lit smoke of a train just coming in from Oran. Radoub, noting these, looked up and down the road; to right, to left, not a soul was there to be seen. Then, calling to Choc, he struck into his stride.

Five miles or so from Sidi-bel-Abbes a mounted police patrol passed Radoub without halting and with scarcely a glance at him, but they were going toward the town, and would know nothing of his escape.

Then, thinking things over, he reflected that the fact of his escape would be still unknown even at the barracks, where it was just turning-in time. Legionnaires sometimes outstopped their leave. The pursuit would not be at his heels till tomorrow morning, when, definitely declared absent, his description would be circulated right to Oran.

But this did not incline him to slacken his pace. He kept on steadily, till he had reached a point some ten miles from the town; then he took his seat by the wayside, took the sausages, which were wrapped up in a sheet of the Journal d'Oran, from his pocket and divided one with Choc. Then, noticing a prickly pear bush growing nearby he cut some of the fruit and carefully peeled it.

It was their first meal in the desert, and they had four, for it was not till the morning of the third day of his escape that Radoub entered Oran.

Radoub's adventures during that journey of eighty miles or less would fill a brilliant chapter of fiction. He was stopped and spoken to by a police patrol and escaped suspicion of being a deserter by assuming the role of a deaf mute. He joined a band of wandering Arabs, and, suspecting their good intentions, escaped from them. This little escape within an escape caused him more trouble than any other incident of the journey. Lastly, by means of a bribe of two francs, he managed to enter Oran in a cart loaded with esparto grass and drawn by two mules, thus avoiding the attentions of the gentleman at the gate of the town.

There was a rat in the cart as well and the maddening fumes of it surged through Choc's brain, but he did not lose his reason or his self-command.

(Continued on Tenth Page.)